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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR TACTILELY RESPONSIVE USER INTERFACE

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

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The present invention relates to user interface devices and in particular to devices providing tactile responsiveness and having programmable force-position profiles defining tactile responsiveness in manipulating a cursor on a screen display.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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In numerous contexts humans perform tasks by interacting with machines via actuators having knobs, dials or linear actuators. Such human interaction in many instances becomes conditioned upon the responsiveness of the actuator. The human operator interacts in accordance with tactile feedback perceived through contact with the actuator knobs, dials or handles.

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For example, in video or film editing using systems as described in U.S. Patent Nos. 4,937,685 and 4,964,004 which are

1 incorporated herein by reference, an editor edits video image  
2 information at a console having a plurality of "control wheels"  
3 (i.e. large dials or knobs). The film or video editor controls  
4 operation of a composition system from an operator's console, as  
5 illustrated in Fig. 1, using two sets of controls, one for each  
6 hand, to control the editing process. Each control set includes a  
7 plurality of finger switches or pushbuttons 110 clustered proximate  
8 to a large rotatable control wheel 112, facilitating tactile  
9 operation with minimal hand movement. As the editor is focussing  
10 on at least one video monitor, viewing frames of visual source  
11 material during the editing function, it is generally the case that  
12 the operator will acquire a feel for the various controls and  
13 become acclimated to their functionality through tactile feedback  
14 therefrom, rather than having to look at the control wheel(s) for  
15 visual feedback. Accordingly, more efficient human interaction  
16 with, and sensitivity to the composition system is achieved.

17 The control wheels 112 exhibit tactile responsiveness, such as  
18 detents or clicks, as they are rotated. Typically, a full rotation  
19 of the wheel 112 is correlated to a unit of time, such as one  
20 second, of viewing the visual source material being edited. A  
21 corresponding number of "frames" of visual source material will be  
22 viewed during such a time period, depending on the medium or type  
23 of source material being edited. It is most desirable that the  
24 number of frames of source material be correlated to the tactile  
25 responsiveness, i.e. number of clicks, of the wheel 112 during  
26 rotation. For instance, film editing involves standardized source

1 material of which twenty-four (24) frames are provided per second.  
2 Thus, it is most desirable that in a full rotation of the wheel 112  
3 (presenting one second of source material), the wheel respond with  
4 twenty-four (24) clicks, each click corresponding to one frame of  
5 the visual source material.

6 While film editing involves source material having twenty-four  
7 (24) frames per second, other video medium standards require  
8 different frame rates. The frame rate, or number of frames per  
9 second according to the National Television System Committee (NTSC)  
10 is thirty (30) frames per second, a standard promulgated for  
11 television video in the United States. Standards such as PAL and  
12 SECAM provide for a standard frame rate of twenty-five (25) frames  
13 per second in England and France respectively. New standards for  
14 high definition television specify a frame rate of thirty (30) or  
15 sixty (60) frames per second.

16 Differing frame rate standards relating to visual source  
17 material and the nature of mechanical detents in actuators,  
18 presents the problem that multiple actuators are required to  
19 facilitate correlation between actuator tactile responsiveness and  
20 the various visual source material standards. As illustrated in  
21 Fig. 1a, actuators known in the art for providing tactile  
22 responsiveness typically incorporate a mechanical detent mechanism.  
23 A fixed number of clicks is provided by a spring loaded friction  
24 mechanism 111 coacting with a sprocket 113 having a fixed number of  
25 cogs or detents corresponding to the desired number of clicks per  
26 revolution. Therefore, an actuator having twenty-four fixed

1       detents is required and dedicated for a film editing context, a  
2       thirty detent actuator is required for a NTSC video editing system,  
3       a twenty five detent actuator is required in the PAL or CCAM video  
4       editing context, etc. The plurality of actuators required limits  
5       the flexibility of visual source material composition systems and  
6       significantly increases the complexity, cost and hardware  
7       requirements of a flexible system.

8       In addition to the lack of flexibility of use of fixed  
9       mechanical detent actuators, such actuators disadvantageously  
10      become worn and suffer tactile responsiveness degradation over  
11      time. Other mechanically/spring loaded linear or rotary actuators  
12      suffer similar deficiencies.

13      Likewise, other types of actuators or user interface devices  
14      are known for permitting users to interact with electronic devices,  
15      such as personal computers. Such user interface devices, like a  
16      trackball or mouse as disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 4,868,549 ("the  
17      '549 patent"), may include tactile responsiveness in the form of  
18      resistance to movement of the device as the device is actuated and  
19      the cursor moves across predetermined areas of the display screen.

20      In the '549 patent a mouse is disclosed which has an  
21      electromagnetic means, in the form of an electromagnet in  
22      conjunction with a magnetic surface or an electromagnetic brake,  
23      which provides resistance to the movement of a "spherical ball  
24      pickup". Feedback or tactile responsiveness is achieved in one  
25      embodiment by controlling the degree of sliding friction between a  
26      magnetic portion of the mouse and a magnetic pad surface on which

1 the mouse must be actuated. Disadvantageously, the magnetic pad  
2 surface is a requirement in such an embodiment, and the friction  
3 forces between the pad and the mouse may be affected in ways that  
4 may not be predictable and might be detrimental to the tactile  
5 responsiveness.

6 In another embodiment in the '549 patent, an electromagnetic  
7 brake is included and resistance is provided by the brake directly  
8 to the spherical ball or tracking element. The braking mechanism  
9 is totally self-contained within the mouse eliminating the need for  
10 a magnetic pad surface. However, while the electromagnetic brake  
11 provides a stopping mechanism, it cannot provide a continuous  
12 torque to the tracking element, i.e. no torque is applied when the  
13 tracking element is stopped. Such a mechanism cannot be used to  
14 change tactile responsiveness, e.g. to decrease resistance, as a  
15 function of characteristics of a particular screen display. The  
16 resistance provided is only opposed to motion and cannot aid motion  
17 by actively driving the ball to facilitate ease of motion in  
18 certain display areas or to keep the cursor off of the boundary of  
19 a restricted display area.

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21 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

22 The present invention provides an actuator having  
23 electronically controllable tactile responsiveness which is  
24 flexibly programmable to facilitate provision in a single actuator  
25 of torque-position characteristics, such as a selectable number of  
26 detents per actuation through its full operative path. In an

1       illustrative case of a rotary actuator the present invention  
2       facilitates provision in a single actuator, of torque versus  
3       angular position characteristics, such as a selectable number of  
4       detents per revolution.

5       According to the invention, an actuator is in communication  
6       with a servo motor having a position encoder which outputs position  
7       information to a controller that has access to torque-position  
8       relation information. The output of the controller is a digital  
9       torque signal, in accordance with the torque-position relation  
10      information, which is converted to an analog current signal applied  
11      to the servo motor to generate torque in the servo motor. The  
12      torque, presenting a tactile response to a human interacting with  
13      the actuator, is sensed as a detent or a plurality of detents.

14      In further accord with the invention, the controller is a  
15      microprocessor which receives position information, from the  
16      encoder, through a counter as a position count. Torque-position  
17      relation information is stored in microprocessor accessible  
18      firmware as a table containing a series of particular torque values  
19      corresponding to a series of particular position values. The  
20      torque values, output as digital signals and converted by a digital  
21      to analog converter, can be modified in accordance with a plurality  
22      of stored torque versus position tables to facilitate flexible  
23      programming of various torque profiles.

24      Features of the invention include the capacity to store and  
25      modify torque profiles and to select one of a predetermined set of  
26      torque profiles to provide an actuator with a desired tactile

1 responsiveness. The torque profiles, stored for example, in  
2 electrically erasable programmable read only memory can be changed  
3 via a computer in communication with the microprocessor. Upon  
4 system power down and subsequent power up, a previously entered  
5 torque profile can be present as a default profile.

6 In a further embodiment of the invention, a user interface  
7 device, such as a trackball or mouse, is provided and implemented  
8 with programmable tactile responsiveness. In a mouse or trackball  
9 embodiment, the device includes an interface mechanism comprised of  
10 at least two sets of wheels that move as a spherical ball or  
11 tracking element is actuated by a user. The wheels are aligned on  
12 mutually orthogonal axes and each of at least two sets of wheels  
13 has a servo motor attached thereto and a position encoder  
14 associated with each servo motor. Position information from the  
15 position encoder is received by a controller that has access to  
16 tactile force information, i.e. torque-display position  
17 information.

18 The torque-display position information relates a position or  
19 coordinate of a display entity or cursor on a display screen of an  
20 electronic device to a force or torque applied to the user  
21 interface device, effecting tactile responsiveness of the user  
22 interface device as a function of the display screen on which the  
23 display entity or cursor is manipulated. The controller, having  
24 received the display entity or cursor position information from the  
25 position encoders, generates an output which is a digital signal in  
26 accordance with the force-display position relation information.

1 The force can be positive or negative, to assist or resist motion.  
2 In a disclosed embodiment, a digital torque signal output in  
3 accordance with torque-display position information is converted  
4 via a digital to analog converter, to an analog current signal  
5 which is applied to servo motors to generate torque in the servo  
6 motors. The torque generated in the servo motors is translated to  
7 the tracking element or ball of the user interface device and  
8 perceived by the user as tactile responsiveness that is a function  
9 of the position of the cursor on the screen display.

10 Features of the invention include the capability to effect  
11 tactile screen boundaries, and "walls" and "troughs" which  
12 correspond to button bar functions or icon placement on a drag-down  
13 menu, by increasing and decreasing resistance to further  
14 manipulation of the interface device by the user, or by aiding  
15 motion of the device. "Bumps" and other textures can be  
16 implemented on the screen display and tactilely perceived as the  
17 cursor is moved. Cell boundaries can be defined by hard stops or  
18 "hills" which a cursor will roll off to limit access to screen  
19 areas or otherwise provide an indication of cursor position without  
20 requiring the user to look at the screen. Different tactile  
21 response profiles can be stored to correspond to different screen  
22 displays and user applications. Physically impaired people can  
23 interface to computer applications without the need for sight or  
24 fine motor skills.

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#### DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWING

These and other features and advantages of the present invention will become more apparent in view of the following detailed description in conjunction with the accompanying drawing, of which:

Fig. 1 is an illustration of an operator's console for editing visual source material in a composition system:

Fig. 1a is a partially broken-away view of an actuator according to the prior art having mechanical detents;

Fig. 2 is a block diagram of a system for providing programmable tactile feedback in an actuator;

Fig. 3 is a block diagram of a system for providing programmable tactile feedback in an actuator, wherein the controller comprises a counter, microprocessor and accessible firmware.

Fig. 3a is an illustrative diagram of an actuator and associated function keys for controlling multiple functions and providing multiple tactile responses in accordance with the selected function.

Fig. 4 is a block diagram of a system for providing programmable tactile feedback in an actuator, wherein the system further includes a tachometer sensing motor actuation to generate a corresponding actuation in an associated actuator.

Fig. 5A is a view of a prior art mechanical means for introducing resistance in an exercise machine:

Fig. 5B is a block diagram illustrating implementation of a

1        torque controller according to the invention implemented in an  
2        exercise machine;

3            Fig. 6 is a block diagram of a joystick implementation of an  
4        actuator with electronically controllable tactile responsiveness;  
5        and

6            Fig. 7 is a perspective view, partially broken away, of a  
7        trackball implementation of a user interface device according to  
8        the invention;

9            Fig. 8A and 8B are front and side views, respectively, of a  
10        wheel assembly implemented in the trackball of FIG. 1;

11            Fig. 9 is a plan view of the wheel assembly of Figs. 8A and 8B  
12        attached to a motor and encoder assembly;

13            Fig. 10 is a diagrammatic representation of a pair of wheel  
14        sets having motors and encoders associated therewith, and  
15        contacting the tracking element;

16            Fig. 10A is a diagrammatic representation of a wheel set  
17        disposed for a third axis (z-axis) responsiveness;

18            Fig. 11 is a diagrammatic representation of a user interface  
19        device according to the invention configured to interface to a  
20        personal computer;

21            Fig. 12 is a block diagram of a system according to the  
22        invention; and

23            Figs. 13A-13D show a user interface screen and profiles for  
24        tactile responsiveness implemented to effect characteristics of the  
25        screen.

1                   DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF AN ILLUSTRATIVE EMBODIMENT

2       Referring now to Fig. 2, an actuator, such as a rotary  
3       actuator having a control knob 114 is attached via a shaft to a  
4       servo motor 116. In this illustrative embodiment wherein the  
5       actuator is for use in a film/video editing context, the servo  
6       motor is a PMI 12FVS motor. In the present application, as  
7       discussed in greater detail hereinafter, the servo motor is not  
8       used as a motor per se, but rather as a torque controller. The  
9       motor never runs at a significant amount of its rated revolutions  
10      per minute, but operates normally in this application in a stalled  
11      or semi-stalled state. The preferred motor 116 has an installed  
12      encoder 118. The encoder 118 is a PMI M23, 300 segment modular  
13      encoder having an index and providing 300 cycles per revolution,  
14      which results in 1200 waveform edges from index to index. Note  
15      that in this illustrative embodiment it is important that the  
16      encoder be selected to provide a number of edges which is divisible  
17      by factors of two, three, five and eight. Thus, position  
18      information can be electronically divided to provide an integer  
19      number of clicks in selectable modes of 24, 25 and 30 positions per  
20      revolution (corresponding to the film/video editing standards of  
21      24, 25 and 30 frames per second or revolution, as discussed  
22      hereinbefore).

23       The position information received from the encoder 118 is  
24       processed by a controller 120 so that it represents a positional  
25       count. The controller 120 accesses stored input data 122 in the  
26       form of torque-position relation information which correlates a

1 received position count with a related torque value. As noted  
2 hereinbefore, the position count, which is a function of encoder  
3 output information, can be derived by electronically dividing  
4 position information provided by the encoder waveform, as desired  
5 into a selected number of positions or position values. The input  
6 data 122 accessed by the controller 120 will have stored torque  
7 values associated with the selected position values as provided in  
8 accordance with the desired torque profile. The controller 120  
9 outputs the torque value as a digital signal which is converted by  
10 a latchable digital to analog converter 124 to an analog voltage.  
11 As a voltage applied to the motor would result in a proportional  
12 motor speed, the analog voltage is related to motor torque by  
13 generating a proportional motor current using a power amplifier 126  
14 in conjunction with a motor power supply 128. The torque related  
15 current is applied to the motor 116 to present the desired torque  
16 which imparts the desired tactile responsiveness to the control  
17 knob 114.

18 In an embodiment illustrated in Fig. 3, the controller 120  
19 comprises a counter 130 which receives the servo motor position  
20 information from the encoder 118. A microprocessor 132, such as a  
21 Motorola 6809, receives a position count from the counter 130  
22 providing an indication of servo motor position relative to the  
23 index. The count provided by the counter will increment or  
24 decrement depending on the direction of the change of position of  
25 the servo motor. The microprocessor accesses electrically erasable  
26 programmable read only memory 134 (EEPROM) which is programmed with

1       one or more tables of torque-position relation information. Each  
2       table defines a particular torque profile specifying a torque value  
3       corresponding to a particular position count (i.e. knob/servo motor  
4       position).

5       A main application CPU 136 runs an application which requires  
6       and defines particular torque profiles for the actuator 114. The  
7       main application CPU may run an application which defines the  
8       functionality of a control wheel and related function buttons as  
9       illustrated in Fig. 3a. In this illustrative embodiment the  
10      control wheel has an outer dial 140 which according to the  
11      application performs a first function having a fixed number of  
12      positions, such as selecting one of a plurality of switch settings.  
13      The application can assign a second function to the same outer  
14      dial 140 and provide a profile assigning an alternative  
15      responsiveness to the outer dial actuator, such as assigning a  
16      lever control function having electronically defined stop  
17      positions, when a shift key 142 is depressed. An inner control  
18      knob 144 similarly can be assigned a first function and  
19      corresponding torque profile (such as a free running non-detent  
20      scan function), by the application running on the main application  
21      CPU, and a second (or other) function and corresponding torque  
22      profile (such as a 30 detent per rotation edit mode, as discussed  
23      hereinbefore), which is invoked such as by depressing an alt  
24      key 146.

25       The main application CPU 136, upon application initialization,  
26       down loads the desired torque profiles to the microprocessor

1       accessible EEPROM, via an RS-232 serial, or other communication  
2       port. The desired torque profiles reside in EEPROM and are  
3       selectable via the microprocessor for providing the desired torque  
4       at the appropriate actuator position(s) in accordance with the  
5       requirements of the main application. A desired torque profile can  
6       be selected by a user operating the control knob 144 or outer  
7       dial 140 actuators, alone or with other control functions such as  
8       the alt or shift keys, to be responsive in accordance with the  
9       first or second function. A change in actuator function, and a  
10       corresponding change in actuator responsiveness (i.e. torque  
11       profile) can be effected via selected key strokes, such as a shift  
12       key or function key implementation discussed.

13       The EEPROM resident tables will not change until a new set of  
14       profiles is programmed, i.e down loaded, into the microprocessor  
15       accessible memory. Thus, when the system is powered down and  
16       subsequently powered up, the previously selected torque profile is  
17       resident and available as a default mode for the respective  
18       actuators.

19       As illustrated in Fig. 4, the selectable torque profiles and  
20       tactile responsiveness of the actuator according to the invention  
21       can be implemented so that a second actuator 150 is responsive to  
22       a first actuator 114', operating substantially as discussed  
23       hereinbefore. In certain operations it is desirable to have two  
24       actuators working in conjunction according to a common torque  
25       profile. In such a case, the servo motor of one actuator can be  
26       used to actually drive a second motor, in addition to its function

1 as a torque controller.

2 For instance, it is desirable when editing film, to turn the  
3 first actuator 114' to add one or more frames to one end of the  
4 composition material while removing one or the same number of  
5 frames from an opposite end of the composition material controlled  
6 by the second actuator 150. In such a case, rather than trying to  
7 turn the respective control knobs exactly the same amount, it would  
8 be best to have the second actuator 150 respond according to the  
9 first actuator 114' and its associated torque profile.

10 As the first actuator 114' is manually rotated N clicks as  
11 sensed according to its torque profile implemented as discussed  
12 hereinbefore with respect to Fig. 3, the encoder 118' and a  
13 tachometer 152 associated with the first actuator 114' indicate the  
14 direction and speed, respectively, of the first actuator 114' to  
15 the microprocessor 132'. The direction and position of the first  
16 actuator 114' is received from the encoder 118' through the  
17 counter 130'. The rate of change of position, i.e. velocity, is  
18 indicated by the tachometer 152 as an analog signal, which must be  
19 converted by an analog to digital converter 154 for processing  
20 digitally by the microprocessor 132'. The microprocessor 132', in  
21 accordance with the count received from the first actuator 114' and  
22 a velocity profile, generates a digital signal which is delivered  
23 to the second actuator digital to analog converter 156 and  
24 converted to an analog signal, increasing power to a second  
25 actuator servo motor 158. The power increase to the second  
26 actuator servo motor 158 results in an actuation of the second

1       motor in a direction according to the direction sensed, and  
2       according to an operation directed by the microprocessor. The  
3       microprocessor monitors a second actuator encoder 160 to read a  
4       complementary count from the second actuator 150 being driven, and  
5       monitors a second actuator tachometer 160 to sense a velocity  
6       comparable to that of the first actuator being manually actuated.  
7       When the comparisons indicate that the second actuator is actuated  
8       in accordance with the manual actuation of the first actuator, the  
9       operation is complete.

10       While the implementation of a driven actuator describes a  
11       tachometer for determining velocity of the actuators, it will be  
12       appreciated that velocity can be derived by the microprocessor  
13       using a mathematical operation which takes the first derivative of  
14       the rate of change of position information, eliminating the need  
15       for a tachometer. Further, although a motor power supply is  
16       indicated in Fig. 4 for each servo motor, it can be appreciated  
17       that a single power supply can be used for both motors.

18       Although the invention is described herein in the context of  
19       an actuator in a film/video editing context, one of ordinary skill  
20       in the art will appreciate that selectively programmable tactile  
21       responsiveness according to the invention can be provided in many  
22       contexts in which mode selection of tactile responsiveness is  
23       desirable.

24       While the actuator having electronically controllable tactile  
25       responsiveness is described herein as providing a selectable number  
26       of detents or clicks per rotation of a control wheel, it can be

1       appreciated that other torque profiles, such as progressively  
2       increasing torque in one direction or another or increasing torque  
3       to a point of a pseudo hard stop, can be achieved according to the  
4       invention by introducing a torque profile which results in an  
5       appropriate current applied to the servo motor.

6       Further, although programmable tactile responsiveness is  
7       described in the context of a rotary actuator application, it will  
8       be appreciated that selectable tactile responsiveness can be  
9       implemented according to the invention in other applications and  
10       actuator contexts, such as in linear actuator contexts.

11       Referring now to Fig. 5A and 5B, it will be appreciated by  
12       those of ordinary skill in the art in view of the foregoing, that  
13       the electronically controllable tactile responsiveness according to  
14       the invention can be implemented in actuators other than knob type  
15       actuators and in contexts other than video or film editing  
16       contexts. Various exercise machines have mechanisms for providing  
17       resistance, such as the mechanism illustrated in Fig. 5A. The  
18       linear motion of an exerciser pulling alternately on the handles  
19       300, 302 of Fig. 5B is translated and imparts a rotary motion to a  
20       take-up spool 304 (Fig. 5A and 5B). In known exercise machines,  
21       resistance is introduced at the take-up spool by tightening a  
22       mechanical/spring mechanism 306 (Fig. 5A) which increases the work  
23       required to impart linear motion to the handles 300, 302. The  
24       system according to the invention and described hereinbefore can be  
25       implemented in such a context by introducing a bidirectional servo-  
26       motor 308 (Fig. 5B) which is adapted to receive bidirectional

1 torque versus position information in the form of current profiles  
2 resulting in resistance similar to that introduced by the  
3 mechanical means of 306 of Fig. 5A. The current provided by the  
4 torque controller 310 is a function of torque adjust profiles 312  
5 which are selectable/programmable and stored in a manner as  
6 discussed hereinbefore.

7 Similarly, referring now to Fig. 6, programmable tactile  
8 responsiveness can be implemented in an actuator such as a joystick  
9 actuator 400. In such a context, torque profiles are stored in  
10 tables within a torque controller 402 in the form of at least two  
11 tables for containing profiles to control motors in at least two  
12 axes. A first servo motor 403 is attached to a sphere 404 to which  
13 a joystick 406 is fixed. The first motor 403 is fixed to the  
14 sphere 404 to which the joystick is fixed and controls the tactile  
15 responsiveness of the joystick 406 as it is linearly actuated in  
16 directions indicated by the arrow A-B. The linear motion of the  
17 joystick in the direction A-B is translated into a rotary motion by  
18 a shaft 408 forming an axis about which the joystick 406 rotates in  
19 a limited manner. The torque controller 402 contains at least one  
20 profile table that determines the current provided to the first  
21 servo motor 403 and ultimately determines the particular  
22 responsiveness of joystick 406 as it is actuated in directions A-B.

23 A second servo motor 410 is mounted to a fixed frame or  
24 surface 412 and controls responsiveness of the joystick 406 as it  
25 is actuated in the direction indicated by arrow C-D. An assembly  
26 comprised of the sphere 404, joystick 406 and first motor 403 is

1 capable of limited rotation about an axis formed by a shaft 414  
2 which is connected at a first end to the second motor 410 and at a  
3 second end to a bearing 416. As the joystick 406 is actuated in  
4 the direction C-D, the sphere 404, and first motor 403 to which the  
5 joystick 406 is attached is actuated having a responsiveness as  
6 determined by at least a second profile table stored in the torque  
7 controller 402.

8 Although the illustrative embodiments of the exercise  
9 implementation and joystick implementation describe controlled  
10 tactile responsiveness in a single axis and double axis context  
11 respectively, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill in  
12 the art that tactile responsiveness can be implemented in a  
13 plurality of axes greater than 2.

14 Furthermore, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary skill  
15 in the art that various mechanisms, such as the spool of the  
16 exerciser implementation, are useful for translating torque into  
17 linear force and/or linear force into rotational torque, and that  
18 the tables discussed hereinbefore while containing torque versus  
19 position profiles can be programmed to comprise force versus linear  
20 position profiles.

21 Referring now to Figs. 7-9, a user interface device can be  
22 implemented according to the invention, to include tactile  
23 responsiveness as a function of the position of a display entity,  
24 e.g. cursor, on a screen display. In this illustrative embodiment  
25 a trackball 500 is implemented including a plurality of sets of  
26 drive wheels 502 which contact a tracking member or ball 504. As

1 will be understood by those of ordinary skill in the art,  
2 manipulation of the tracking member or ball 504 effects  
3 manipulation or movement of a cursor on a screen display (not shown  
4 in Figs. 7-9). The details of construction and manufacture of a  
5 trackball and/or mouse implementation will be understood by those  
6 of ordinary skill in the art, and therefore will not be presented  
7 here other than to present significant components and their  
8 interrelationships.

9 In this illustrative embodiment, the tracking member or ball  
10 is interconnected in the user interface device by an  
11 interconnection mechanism comprised of sets of drive wheels. Each  
12 of the sets of drive wheels 502, best illustrated in Figs. 8A and  
13 8B, is comprised of a hub 506 about which at least one frame  
14 structure 508 is configured. The frame(s) 508 have a plurality of  
15 frame portions each extending longitudinally through a respective  
16 one of a plurality of barrel-shaped gripping members 510.  
17 Preferably, the outside radius of a large portion of the gripping  
18 members 510 is equal to the outside radius of the drive wheels 502.  
19 Two drive wheels are used, offset slightly, to make the contact  
20 with the ball 504 smooth so as to avoid a "bumpy" feeling as the  
21 ball 504 is actuated and in turn actuates the wheels 502. The  
22 gripping members are each rotatable around the frame portion that  
23 extends through and supports it. The gripping members 510 are made  
24 of a polymeric material suitable for establishing gripping contact  
25 with the ball 504. In this illustrative embodiment, as illustrated  
26 in Fig. 8A, two frames 508 are configured about the hub 506. The

1 gripping members 510 are offset or staggered in order to compensate  
2 for gaps between gripping members on a respective frame, to  
3 maintain a gripping member in contact with the ball 504 at all  
4 times.

5 Each pair of frames 508 attached to a common hub 506 and with  
6 associated gripping members 510, constitutes a wheel set that is  
7 attachable, as illustrated in Fig. 9, to a servo motor 512 and  
8 encoder 514 to form a drive/position assembly 516. In this  
9 illustrative embodiment the drive/position assembly servo motor is  
10 used actively as a motor. The servo motor may be a Pittman Model  
11 No. 8322 (manufactured by Pittman, Harleysville, PA), which  
12 optionally comes with an integrated optical encoder which fulfills  
13 the encoder requirement. At least one drive/position assembly 516  
14 is configured to apply torque and sense position along a respective  
15 one of mutually orthogonally disposed axes, e.g. an x-axis  
16 corresponding to cursor movement across a display screen, a y-axis  
17 orthogonally disposed with respect to the x-axis and corresponding  
18 to cursor movement up and down on a screen, and a z-axis  
19 orthogonally disposed with respect to the x and y axes and  
20 corresponding to cursor movement in and out of a screen in a three  
21 dimensional configuration. In some instances, as described  
22 hereinafter, a wheel set is attached to a motor without an encoder,  
23 or just a bearing 518 to implement a complementary slave assembly  
24 520 when it may not be desirable to include additional servo motors  
25 and/or encoders. The referenced servo motor, without an encoder,  
26 may be employed passively as a bearing.

1        To implement a two dimensional user interface device, e.g.  
2        trackball or mouse, the tracking element or ball 504 is configured  
3        to have at least two drive/position assemblies 516 positioned with  
4        the gripping members 510 in contact with the ball. As illustrated  
5        in Fig. 10, a first drive/position assembly 516 is positioned with  
6        the gripping members of its wheel set in contact with the ball, and  
7        includes a servo motor and encoder. A first complementary slave  
8        assembly 520 is positioned opposed to the first drive/position  
9        assembly 516 and has gripping members of its wheel set engaging the  
10       side of the ball 504 opposite the first drive/position assembly  
11       516.

12       A second drive/position assembly 516' is positioned on an axis  
13       orthogonal with respect to the first drive/position assembly 516  
14       and has a servo motor and encoder attached thereto. A second  
15       complementary slave assembly 520' is positioned opposed to the  
16       second drive/position assembly 516' and has gripping members of its  
17       wheel set engaging the side of the ball 504 opposite the second  
18       drive/position assembly 516'. In the illustrative two dimensional  
19       implementation, the complementary slave assemblies include motors  
20       that are slaved to the motors of the drive/position assemblies.  
21       Such slaved motors produce a complementary torque to assist the  
22       drive/position assemblies in applying a more balanced torque to the  
23       ball. It will be appreciated that a less expensive device can be  
24       implemented according to the invention by merely having the wheel  
25       sets opposed to the drive/position assemblies configured with a  
26       bearing to passively engage the ball.

1        As illustrated in Fig. 10A, in implementing a three  
2        dimensional user interface device according to the invention, a  
3        drive/position assembly 516'' is positioned along a circumference  
4        of the ball 504 such that the orientation of the wheel set is  
5        orthogonally disposed with respect to the orientation of the wheel  
6        sets of the x and y axis assemblies (in Fig. 10A for simplicity  
7        only one wheel set 516 is shown exemplifying the orientation of the  
8        x and y axis assemblies). The z-axis drive/position assembly 516''  
9        is preferably configured with a complementary slave assembly 520''  
10        disposed along an axis that is perpendicular to an axis along which  
11        the drive/position assembly 516'' is disposed. Although the  
12        functionality of a two dimensional implementation is described  
13        hereinafter for ease of explanation, it will be appreciated that a  
14        z-axis drive/position assembly and complementary slave assembly can  
15        readily be implemented in a user interface device that is  
16        responsive in three dimensions.

17        Referring now to Figs. 11 and 12, the drive/position  
18        assemblies 516 and complementary slave assemblies 520 are  
19        configured with the ball 504 (not shown in Figs. 11 and 12), as a  
20        user interface device 500 in a system that includes an electronic  
21        device or computer system 528 with a screen 530 on which a cursor  
22        is positioned on a screen display or graphical user interface, as  
23        known in the art. The computer to which the user interface device  
24        500 is connected has an operating system and is capable of running  
25        various application programs which result in various screen  
26        displays on which the cursor is manipulated using the user

1       interface device 500.

2           The user interface device 500 includes at least a first and  
3       second drive/position assembly 516, 516' each with a servo motor  
4       534 and encoder 536 and associated first and second complementary  
5       slave assemblies 520, 520' for respectively sensing y-axis and x-  
6       axis ball movement to be translated into a cursor position on the  
7       display. In this illustrative embodiment, each of the servo motors  
8       in the drive/position assemblies is connected in series with its  
9       respective complementary slave assembly motor which results in the  
10      motor pairs seeing the same current. In the present application  
11      each servo motor 534 is not used as a motor per se, but rather as  
12      a torque controller. The motor never runs at a significant amount  
13      of its rated revolutions per minute, but operates normally in this  
14      application in a stalled or semi-stalled state. The preferred  
15      motor, as discussed hereinabove, has an installed encoder 536. The  
16      encoder 536 is matched to the motor and the motor application as  
17      appreciated by one of ordinary skill in the art.

18           The computer or electronic device 528, as known in the art,  
19       is configured to accept an interface board 532 which includes the  
20      mechanisms required to electronically interface the user interface  
21      device 500 to the computer system 528 and display 530. The  
22      interface board 532 is typically configured to reside in an I/O  
23      slot of the computer 528 and includes a microprocessor 538 which  
24      communicates with the computer 528 via a serial communication  
25      channel 540. In the embodiment illustrated in Fig. 11, the  
26      interface board 532 comprises a counter 542 associated with each

1       encoder 536. Each counter 542 receives servo motor position  
2       information from the encoder 118. The microprocessor 538, such as  
3       a Motorola 6809, receives a position count from each counter 542  
4       providing an indication of position of each servo motor relative to  
5       an index. The count provided by the counter will be incremented or  
6       decremented depending on the direction of the change of position of  
7       the servo motor relative to the index, which is indicative of a  
8       change in position of the ball and the cursor on the screen  
9       display.

10       The microprocessor 538 accesses torque profile information  
11       from a storage mechanism as a function of the coordinate position  
12       indicated via the encoders, i.e. x-axis position and y-axis  
13       position. The storage mechanism can be internal to the  
14       microprocessor and/or external in the form of additional torque  
15       profile storage 545 (such as EEPROM, ROM, disk, CDROM etc). The  
16       torque profile information provides an indication of a torque or  
17       force to be applied by/to the motor. The torque is a function of  
18       the position of the cursor on the screen and a function of the  
19       particular screen display on which the cursor is being manipulated.

20       As in the embodiments described hereinbefore, the torque  
21       value, in this case a value for each motor or axis, is output from  
22       the storage mechanism as a digital signal which is converted by a  
23       latchable digital to analog converter (D/A) 544 to an analog  
24       voltage. As a voltage applied to the motor would result in a  
25       proportional motor speed, the analog voltage is related to motor  
26       torque by generating a proportional motor current using a power

1        driver or amplifier 546 (for each motor). The torque related  
2        current is applied to the motor(s) 516, 516', 520, 520', to present  
3        the desired torque which imparts the desired tactile responsiveness  
4        to the ball 504.

5        The computer 528 runs an application, or several applications,  
6        which requires and defines particular torque profiles for the user  
7        interface device 500. Each screen display of an application  
8        running on the computer has torque profile information associated  
9        with that particular screen display to effect a corresponding  
10       particular tactile responsiveness for that screen display. The  
11       torque profile information which is being processed is stored in  
12       the microprocessor. Additional torque profile information which is  
13       not immediately required for a running screen display can be stored  
14       in external memory associated with the microprocessor 545. The  
15       torque profile information represents a spatial array that  
16       indicates the relationship of motor currents or torques as a  
17       function of position parameters for each axis present in the  
18       embodiment. In this illustrative embodiment the array must contain  
19       torque information for x and y axis motor pairs as a function of  
20       the x and y coordinate position of the cursor on the particular  
21       screen display(s).

22       Preferably, a large volume of torque profile information  
23       defining the tactile responsiveness of numerous screen displays of  
24       an application software package or an operating system is stored in  
25       a database associated with a particular application or applications  
26       that run on the computer. As illustrated in Fig. 12, the computer

1       typically runs an operating system or main application 550 which is  
2       stored on some external storage medium such as a disk or CD ROM and  
3       paged or transferred to the computer's main memory as the  
4       application code is running.

5       A database of torque profiles 552, as part of an application  
6       running under the operating system or with the application 550,  
7       defines the tactile responsiveness of the user interface device  
8       based on the screen displays of the application(s). The torque  
9       profile information 552 is accessible to the application(s) or  
10       operating system(s) via the application's application program  
11       interface (API), as known in the art. The torque profiles relate  
12       the tactile responsiveness of the user interface device 500 to the  
13       graphical user interface(s) or screen display(s) of the application  
14       550, as respective torque profiles are downloaded or made available  
15       to the microprocessor 538 on the interface board 532 to generate  
16       the appropriate digital signals in response to the position  
17       information received from the encoders, as discussed hereinbefore.

18       A user interface device driver 554 facilitates communication  
19       between the microprocessor 538 on the interface board 532 for the  
20       user interface device 500, and the host computer 528. The  
21       microprocessor computes coordinates for a change of cursor position  
22       by processing the information received from the encoders and  
23       information known about the original position of the cursor as  
24       provided by the host computer over the serial channel 540. The  
25       driver communicates the information related to cursor position to  
26       and from the host computer which effects actual positioning of the

1 cursor. In the present embodiment, the driver 554 is generic to  
2 the user interface device 500 and is modified slightly from a mouse  
3 or trackball I/O device driver as known in the art, in that the  
4 driver 554, through an interface to the torque profile information  
5 552 and application software 550 coordinates the downloading of  
6 appropriate torque profile information to the microprocessor based  
7 on indications from the application 550 as to the appropriate  
8 torque profile.

9 Based on the application being run on the host 528, the driver  
10 554 running on the host communicates relevant torque profile  
11 information to the microprocessor 538. The driver also  
12 communicates information to the microprocessor regarding the  
13 present position of the cursor on the display screen of the host  
14 528. In response to the coordinate information of the cursor on  
15 the display screen, the microprocessor 538 generates digital  
16 information corresponding to the appropriate torque relative to the  
17 position of the cursor on the screen, in accordance with the  
18 relevant torque-position profile for that screen display. The D/A  
19 544 for each axis receives the digital torque information and  
20 produces the appropriate analog signal to the power driver(s) 546  
21 which generate a current to apply the positive or negative torque  
22 to the motors resulting in the applicable tactile responsiveness of  
23 the ball 504.

24 When the trackball or mouse is moved to effect a movement of  
25 the cursor on the display screen 530, each encoder 536 sends  
26 position information to the microprocessor 538. Position

1 information in this illustrative embodiment includes an indication  
2 of the direction and number of steps the encoder is changed in  
3 response to actuation of the associated wheel set in contact with  
4 the manually manipulated ball 504. The microprocessor 538 receives  
5 the magnitude and direction information and tracks the position in  
6 the spatial array of relevant torque profile information to  
7 determine the appropriate torque corresponding to the position  
8 information received. The microprocessor 538 communicates the  
9 position information to the user interface device driver which  
10 effects a change in the position of the cursor by communicating  
11 with the computer as is appreciated by those of skill in the art.  
12 The microprocessor 538 also conveys torque information to the servo  
13 motors, via the D/As and power drivers as described, to effect  
14 appropriate tactile responsiveness based on cursor position within  
15 the screen display of the particular application and torque-  
16 position information.

17 The torque-position information stored and made accessible to  
18 the microprocessor for implementing tactile responsiveness of the  
19 user interface device according to the invention can be used to  
20 implement various tactile responses as a function of position of  
21 the cursor on the screen display. Boundaries for cursor  
22 containment and restricted display areas can be implemented by  
23 effecting stops using maximized motor torque. Among other  
24 responsiveness, tactile "hills" and "troughs" can be implemented to  
25 define tactile contours of a graphical user interface such as  
26 illustrated in Figs. 13A-13D. In this particular example of an

1 application, a graphical user interface includes a header showing  
2 a command options banner as it appears on the display screen (Figs.  
3 13a and 13B).

4 The command options banner is a button bar on which a cursor  
5 is positioned by a user using a user interface device to point and  
6 click to effect certain functionality. The various commands, i.e.  
7 "File," Options," "Window," "Help" can be delineated by tactile  
8 boundaries according to the invention, so that the proper  
9 positioning of the cursor within an appropriate area to click and  
10 invoke the command can be easily done and can be tactilely  
11 perceptible. With or without fine motor skills or vision, the user  
12 actuates the user interface device according to the invention and  
13 feels the position of the cursor on the screen display. Tactile  
14 boundaries are programmed, as discussed hereinbefore and as  
15 illustrated in Figs 13C and 13D, so that higher resistance is  
16 perceived at the boundaries with little or no resistance felt when  
17 the cursor is properly positioned.

18 Moving the cursor vertically on the screen toward the button  
19 bar the user will perceive neutral or no resistance in the  
20 unrestricted area 560. A sharp increase in torque will be felt as  
21 the lower boundary 562 of the button bar is encountered. When the  
22 cursor is actuated to a position between the lower boundary and an  
23 upper boundary, i.e. in a trough 564, no resistance is perceived.  
24 As the upper boundary 566 is approached the torque increases and as  
25 the absolute boundary of the screen is encountered increased torque  
26 effects a perceptible stop 568. It should be noted that positive

1 and negative torques can be generated according to the invention so  
2 that the user interface device includes a tendency to urge the  
3 cursor into a position centered within the boundaries.

4 Likewise, when the user interface device is actuated to move  
5 the cursor horizontally along the button bar, as illustrated in  
6 Fig. 13D, boundaries are established that urge the cursor into the  
7 proper position to activate the desired menu selection.

8 It should be appreciated that in addition to boundaries formed  
9 by hills and troughs and walls, the tactile responsiveness of the  
10 user interface device according to the invention can be used to  
11 implement "texturing" that is tactiley perceptible. Slight  
12 increases in torque can be programmed at selected distances with  
13 lesser torque therebetween such that a feeling of bumpiness can be  
14 implemented as the cursor is actuated across a screen display.  
15 Elasticity, in the form of increasing torque to a point of reverse  
16 torque, can be implemented to simulate perceived stretching or  
17 resiliency. Furthermore, given the active nature of the torque  
18 assistance capability of the motor(s) in the user interface device  
19 according to the invention, motion assistance can be effected to  
20 make the device roll off of a bump or hill without manual  
21 assistance (such an application is especially useful where a user  
22 may not have fine motor skills).

23 The EEPROM resident tables or arrays of torque profile  
24 information will not change until a new set of profiles is  
25 programmed, i.e down loaded, into the microprocessor accessible  
26 memory. Thus, when the system is powered down and subsequently

1        powered up, the previously selected torque profile is resident and  
2        available as a default mode for the respective actuators, unless a  
3        particular default state is desired and provided.

4        Although the invention is described hereinbefore with a  
5        singular screen display, it will be appreciated by those of  
6        ordinary skill in the art that the torque position information can  
7        be structured in a manner such that screens can be nested, and  
8        their corresponding profiles nested so that invoking a new screen  
9        from a present screen invokes a corresponding new set of torque  
10      position information.

11       It should be appreciated that although tables or arrays of  
12      torque profile information are discussed in the illustrative  
13      embodiment herein for relating cursor screen position with tactile  
14      responsiveness of the user interface device, torque values may be  
15      calculated "on the fly" for particular screen displays rather than  
16      storing values associated with particular positions. Additionally,  
17      rather than having the user interface device providing information  
18      regarding position and changes thereof, torque values may be  
19      associated with particular cursor locations on a particular screen  
20      display such that the screen generates the position information  
21      which is processed according to the invention to provide resultant  
22      tactile responsiveness.

23       In the embodiment where a slave motor is connected in series,  
24      the slave motor will see the same current as the motor with which  
25      it is connected in series. In such a master/slave motor pair, the  
26      motors should be virtually identical motors to effect smoothness of

1 rotation of the ball or tracking element. However, in order to  
2 minimize cost of a system according to the invention, it will be  
3 appreciated that it may be preferable to exclude the slave motor in  
4 favor of a passive bearing.

5 The description of the invention hereinbefore relates to a  
6 trackball, but it will be appreciated that tactile responsiveness  
7 according to the invention can be implemented in various other user  
8 interface devices, including a mouse, joysticks and other devices  
9 requiring actuation and benefitting from the tactile responsiveness  
10 as a function of position. Further, while "a cursor" is  
11 manipulated in the embodiment described herein, that term is used  
12 generically to describe something manipulated in a user interface  
13 of an electronic device, and it should be appreciated that any of  
14 various symbols and interface or display resident entities can be  
15 manipulated with tactile responsiveness, such as cursors, icons,  
16 windows, menus, or the like.

17 While various embodiments of the invention illustrated herein  
18 describe a main CPU to execute an application program requiring and  
19 defining torque profiles for an actuator, and a separate 6809  
20 microprocessor implementing firmware specifying torque-position  
21 relationships, one of ordinary skill in the art will appreciate  
22 that torque-position relationships can be implemented in the  
23 application CPU without the microprocessor or via numerous other  
24 microcontrollers. Further, while it is described that the torque  
25 profiles are in EEPROM accessible to the microprocessor it will be  
26 appreciated that the torque profiles can be stored in

1        microprocessor resident or other storage means, such as ROM, RAM,  
2        PALs and the like, and accessed accordingly to implement the  
3        desired tactile responsiveness in an actuator.

4        Although the invention has been shown and described with  
5        respect to exemplary embodiments thereof, various other changes,  
6        additions and omissions in the form and detail thereof may be made  
7        therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the  
8        invention.

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